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Three Tales of Doll-Love by Edogawa Ranpo

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Summary

This essay briefly examines three stories by Edogawa Ranpo that treat the theme of “doll-love”. *Hitodenashi no koi*, *Oshie to tabi suru otoko*, and *Mushi*. The relationship between doll-love and the desire for self-metamorphosis that pervades Ranpo’s literature is considered. The essay suggests that the doll functions as a fetish to both reveal and disguise a male character’s perverse desires, by elevating them to a quasi-religious form of love.

Key words

EDOGAWA RANPO, DOLLS, DOLL-LOVE, EROTICISM, FETISHISM, PERVERSION, METAMORPHOSIS, DISGUISE

INTRODUCTION

Throughout his lifetime Edogawa Ranpo (1894-1965) was intensely attracted to the possibility of self-metamorphosis, and this desire exhibited itself in various forms, from the innocent to the lurid, in the enormous body of literature that he produced. In his essay *Henshin ganbō* he writes, “Human beings are not content with themselves as they are. To wish to be a handsome prince or a knight or a beautiful princess is a most common desire, and indeed, popular novels that feature attractive men, beautiful women, and great heroes are written to satisfy such desires. . . . The desire to transform oneself. The universality of this impulse is evident if one just considers cosmetics. Applying cosmetics is none other than a subtle form of self-transformation. When I was a child, my friends and I used to amuse ourselves by putting on plays. I was amazed at the strange pleasure I obtained from dressing myself in women’s clothing and applying makeup in front of a mirror. An actor makes a career out of his desire for transformation. In a single day he can probably change into several

different people. Likewise, in detective stories disguise serves to satisfy this desire for self-transformation.”¹

In Ranpo's fiction, disguise and other modes of self-metamorphosis allow characters to enjoy trying out different identities, and also to conceal their ordinary identities in order to indulge shameful desires or commit illicit acts under a mantle of anonymity.² Ranpo launched his literary career as a writer of detective stories,³ and it was in this genre that he first displayed his passion for disguise. In his renowned series of suspense thrillers that pit master detective Akechi Kogorō against *kaijin nijūmensō* (the mystery man with twenty faces), for example, disguise is the main device used by both men to deceive and outwit each other.

Ranpo's interest in psychopathology — especially the mind of the criminal and the sexual pervert — began to manifest itself early in his writing career as a fascination with the bizarre, grotesque, and sexually taboo. Probably the majority of Ranpo's stories informed by motifs of metamorphosis or disguise have subtle or overt sexual overtones. In *Yaneura no sanposha*, a world-weary man hides in an attic and obtains voyeuristic pleasure from spying on the private lives of those living below him. In *Ningen isu*, an ugly man conceals himself inside a chair and enjoys surreptitiously stroking those who sit on him. Transsexual and castration fantasies constitute a recurrent variation on the theme of metamorphosis in Ranpo's fiction.⁴ In *Kasei unga*, a man dreams rapturously of his body being transformed into a woman's. In *Kotō no oni*, a man's and a woman's bodies are surgically joined, and the pair revel in a nightmarish sort of sexual ecstasy. In *Imomushi*, a man who has been reduced to a caterpillar-like creature, having lost all his limbs in a war accident, becomes the object of his wife's sadistic sexual impulses.

Over the course of Ranpo's literary career, the sexual fantasies expressed in his fiction took increasingly outlandish and macabre forms. Yet paradoxically, it might seem, Ranpo's obvious fondness for the grotesque and his preoccupation with depraved versions of sexual desire are counterbalanced by his yearning for a utopian realm of pure love, childhood pleasures, and spiritual elation. Ranpo's essays offer abundant testimony to his idealistic sensibilities and provide a corrective to his reputation as the master of so-called *ero-guro* (“erotic-grotesque”) fiction. In *Gurotesuku to erochishizumu*, for example, Ranpo expresses his affection for the grotesque, which he views as a quality inherent in things that arouse “a sweet nostalgia for the demons and lion masks of childhood,”⁵ and he distinguishes this sentiment from a vulgar interest in “gruesome” spectacles, which he claims to abhor. Moreover, he dismisses most contemporary material that is labeled *ero* as mere pornography, insisting that eroticism is uplifting, not degrading. Perhaps Ranpo's idealistic, even fastidious, tendencies are most evident in his numerous essays on male homo-

eroticism; in these he extols as the highest form of human love the classical Greek cult of love between men, which is based on Platonic concepts that emphasize spiritual kinship over sensual gratification.⁶

Among Ranpo's fictional works, those that most eloquently evoke an eroticism that expresses socially unacceptable desires, while at the same time purifying and elevating those desires, are those that depict a man who is devoted to a doll or a doll-like woman. The doll, which in a sense seems to embody the man's childhood self, that he is loathe to relinquish, frees the man from normative male adulthood and enables him to indulge in a range of infantile pleasures. The doll's iconic, ritualistic, and uncanny aspects invest it with religious significance for the man. The doll's presence creates a sanctuary in which the man can enact his illicit fantasies under the psychological and rhetorical "mantle" of devotion to a superior form of love.

Ranpo's fascination with the forbidden and his disdain for conventional gratification⁷ led him to explore again and again in his fiction the theme of the private utopia. Tales informed by this theme usually portray a morbidly sensitive man who creates a separate, secret world where his aberrant sexual fantasies can be fulfilled.⁸ This essay will attempt to elucidate narratives of perverse sexual desire that are embedded in three stories by Ranpo, each of which revolves around an eccentric male protagonist's ostensible pursuit of ideal or impossible love. In each story a doll or a doll-like woman serves as the fetishistic object of the male character's entwined spiritual aspirations and deviant sexual desires, and in each text a quasi-religious rhetoric of yearning for an otherworldly realm of ideal love and beauty simultaneously reveals and conceals a discourse of taboo eroticism.

RANPO AND DOLL-LOVE

An essay by Ranpo entitled *Ningyō* testifies to the author's lifelong fascination with dolls and his belief in their supernatural abilities, and it sheds light on some of the underlying reasons for this fascination. It confirms Ranpo's view of the doll as the ultimate fetish in various senses of this term: an erotic stimulus or partner; an object of veneration imbued with magical powers; and a vehicle for expressing hidden, transgressive desires, particularly cross-gender impulses. The essay begins, "Even those who cannot love another human being can love a doll. A person is but a shadow in this transient world, but a doll is immortal. . . . Perhaps [my fondness for dolls] is a kind of escapism. Perhaps I have a slight psychological tendency to necrophilia or fetishism. But it seems to me that my fondness for dolls springs from something rather different."⁹ He proceeds to elaborate on the uncanny power of dolls, a power that

can be traced, it would seem, to their liminal nature: dolls blur the boundary between the animate and the inanimate. As lifeless artifacts, dolls are relatively resistant to the ravages of time. On the other hand, dolls are capable of sharing the life of their owners, creators, or those in whose image they have been made. Their durability as objects combines with their mediumistic aspect to imbue them with an aura of immortality. Ranpo relates several anecdotes in which dolls were apparently animated by the souls of humans, or dolls drained the vitality of humans in a vampire-like fashion.

As liminal creatures themselves, dolls seem to have a special ability to arouse and gratify human impulses toward various forms of ambiguous identity. In this essay Ranpo recounts two stories in which dolls elicited cross-gender behavior from their owners. One anecdote, which Ranpo finds “immensely pleasing,” concerns a doll that had been one of three dolls modeled on a courtesan, who sent the dolls to three of her admirers, all samurai. While the dolls were being made, the woman began to languish, and after the last doll was completed, she died. One of the dead woman’s lovers lived for years with the doll that resembled the woman as his only companion. Not only did he treat the doll as a surrogate mistress, but he played with it much as little girls play with their dolls — caring tenderly for it, arranging its hair in various styles, and so forth. It is this latter aspect of the story, rather than its blatantly sexual aspect, that Ranpo finds compelling. He comments: “No doubt this is a story about a man who treats a doll as a sexual partner, but when I think of this warrior of Kumamoto leading a lonely life, with a doll as his sole companion, I find it endearing to imagine him arranging his doll’s hair and the like, and I can identify with how he must have felt” (*Ningyō*, 33).

Another anecdote that Ranpo relates in this essay is a story read to him in childhood from a *kusazōshi*, by his mother or grandmother, which left a deep impression on him. A young woman of a noble family was heard by her nurse, night after night, exchanging words of love with a young man in her bedroom. The nurse finally reported this to the girl’s father, who entered his daughter’s room that night, prepared to kill the young man for defiling his daughter. He found the girl in bed with a boy doll (*wakashū ningyō*); she was performing the role of the male lover, as well as her own, by speaking the youth’s words in a skillfully feigned male voice. Ranpo remarks that when he heard this story at the age of six or seven, he found it both “frightening and beautiful,” and that he had used it as the basis of a short story, *Hitodenashi no koi*. Interestingly, for his story Ranpo reverses the sexes of the human and the doll in the original tale. This is the first text that I will discuss in this essay.

HITODENASHI NO KOI (Unearthly Love, 1926)

The title of this tale is extremely suggestive, as it evokes positive and negative

nuances of “inhuman” (*hitodenashi*) love, as something both otherworldly and abominable. The story is told in the first person by a female narrator, who recounts her traumatic marriage to a man who was secretly in love with a doll that he had cherished since childhood. The man, named Kadono, was a melancholy, rather misanthropic, but exquisitely handsome individual who belonged to a distinguished, wealthy family. At the time of their arranged marriage, the woman was made uneasy by rumors that Kadono was a “woman-hater,” but attracted by his ethereal elegance and his social status, she married him. (She later realized that he had married her to satisfy his parents and to try to escape the tormenting guilt of his unnatural love.) After a brief period of blissful married life, the wife began to sense that her husband was distracted during their lovemaking. He seemed remote, “at if gazing at something in the distance,”¹⁰ and there was something “mechanical” and “false” about his physical affection. He began leaving their bedroom in the middle of the night to go to his study, a gloomy lair filled with old books, antiques, and family heirlooms, which was on the upper floor of a storehouse on their property. His favorite pastime and source of consolation since his youth had been to retreat to this dim, musty, womb-like place to read, surrounded by the jumble of precious family things that were stored there. One night, having grown increasingly anxious about Kadono’s furtive nocturnal behavior, his wife secretly followed him to this room. From outside the door she heard him conversing with a female, whom she naturally suspected to be his lover. She lay in wait outside the storehouse, but strangely, no woman ever emerged. She returned during the day to search the room and found in a trunk a beautiful old doll, the size of a child, which she realized must be her husband’s partner in his nightly trysts. She was utterly captivated by the doll’s allure, which was both otherworldly and voluptuous. Knowing that she was no match for the enchanting creature, she ripped the doll to shreds, out of jealousy and revenge. That night she followed her husband to his study to savor the pleasure of having destroyed her rival and to expose her husband’s betrayal. Instead, she found him lying with the doll’s remains in a pool of blood, evidently having taken his life with a sword. She recognized the scene as a double love suicide. The doll’s still-lovely face wore an uncanny smile.

Ranpo’s outstanding storytelling skills make this an absorbing tale, despite its simple plot. It would seem, however, that Ranpo’s main interest in writing *Hitodenashi no koi* was to evoke, in fictional form, the multi-nuanced allure of dolls. In this he succeeds admirably. The story is of particular significance as the earliest example in Ranpo’s literature of his use of the doll motif, in a sustained and transparent way, as a metaphor for love that is at once somehow shameful yet superior to ordinary love. The conflicting terms in which the pleasure of doll-love is described in the story — “otherworldly,” “dream-like,”

“fairy-tale-like,” and on the other hand, “nightmarish,” “hellish,” and “monstrous” — infuse some psychological tension and complexity into a story whose dramatic events might otherwise seem both predictable and far-fetched.

The doll to which the protagonist of this story is enthralled possesses many of the same attributes that Ranpo mentions in his aforementioned essay on dolls. These qualities are the source of its appeal to Kadono both in absolute terms, and in implicit comparison to his wife, for whom, despite his efforts, he fails to develop genuine affection. It is the wife who rhapsodically describes, from her own perspective, the charms of her husband’s doll-lover to the reader, and argues eloquently for the uncanny power of dolls in general. This narrative device enhances the story’s persuasiveness, since the wife is the doll’s unsuccessful rival in the story that she relates.

Several aspects of the doll seem to contribute to its appeal for the tale’s protagonist, and enable it to play a pivotal role in synthesizing discourses of utopian and perverse desires in the text. The doll seems to exist in a supernatural dimension, and it seduces humans susceptible to its charms with an implicit promise of transport to that realm. Because of its otherworldly air, it inspires in people a quasi-religious awe; the narrator compares such dolls to statues of the Buddha, with which, she observes, many people through the ages have been known to fall in love. Since a doll is inanimate, it is impervious to the decay of the flesh. Women, on the contrary, personify naturalness, which is offensive to men like Kadono. The doll’s femininity is an entirely artificial, man-made femininity, and this seems to be a major reason that the doll is a desirable alternative to Kadono’s wife.

Despite its air of purity and indestructibility, the doll radiates a voluptuousness and vitality that endow it with erotic appeal. The doll is the object of Kadono’s physical desire, and it serves as his erotic partner during his nocturnal visits to the study. The doll’s warm sensuality is attributable to its receptive, permeable nature. It is not a cold, lifeless object, because it mysteriously partakes of the spirit of both its creator and its long-time owner. In malefic terms, the doll’s capacity for drawing on human vitality manifests itself as a parasitic quality, which partly accounts for Kadono’s inextricable symbiosis with it. His attempts to sever his attachment to the doll and to love a human being — a creature wholly other than himself — prove futile. Also related to the doll’s permeability is its hybrid quality. It impresses the observer as being at once ancient and new, animate and inanimate. And if we interpret the doll as functioning as a sexual fetish for Kadono, then it also subtly blurs gender boundaries, since supposedly the main psychological function of a fetish for its owner is to obscure anatomical differences between the sexes.

The doll, which was Kadono’s special toy and playmate during his childhood, is not merely a nostalgic memento of his past. When Kadono makes his

clandestine visits to the dark, chaotic room in the study, which overflows with relics of his family history, he is literally transported to his childhood world. There the doll serves as a conduit to his childhood psyche. It enables Kadono to temporarily regress to a primitive realm of gender ambiguity that married life has required him to renounce. In view of Kadono's attachment to his childhood, the doll's psychological significance as a fetish object seems clear, and in this context, the interpretation of the term "fetish" proposed by Marjorie Garber in *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* is especially apt: "The fetish is . . . a figure for the undecideability of castration, which is to say a figure of nostalgia for originary wholeness — in the mother, in the child."¹¹

Furthermore, during their nocturnal trysts, Kadono must supply the doll's thoughts and voice and manipulate her body. Thus the doll provides him with the pleasure of performing — psychologically and physically — the female gender role in the romantic encounter, in alternation with the male role. By serving as a vehicle for expressing his repressed feminine impulses, the doll enables Kadono to temporarily recover the gender fluidity of infancy. Could this be the "peculiar," "hellish," "monstrous" pleasure to which the story repeatedly refers? It is otherwise rather difficult to account for the atmosphere of unspeakable transgression and shameful pleasure that pervades the story.

Finally, the doll offers Kadono the masochistic pleasure of self-sacrifice. When his wife destroys his precious doll, she destroys her husband's long-preserved utopian domain of infantile pleasures and ideal love. Unable to endure this loss, the man commits suicide and, from his perspective, he is reunited with his doll-lover in death.

OSHIE TO TABI SURU OTOKO

(The Traveler with the Cloth Picture, 1929)

Hitondenashi no koi contains in prototypical and easily accessible form many elements that tend to be interrelated in Ranpo's fictional explorations of doll-love. Thus it makes an excellent point of entry into stories by Ranpo in which the doll-love theme is present in a more subtle form, or embedded in a more complicated plotline or narrative structure. Ranpo's masterpiece of fantastic fiction, *Oshie to tabi suru otoko*, is one such text. This story has been skillfully constructed to suggest frames within frames and worlds within worlds, on the levels of both narrative structure and subject matter. (Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this brief essay to examine the text's intricate architecture in detail.) The narrator of the outer frame story (hereafter referred to as "the narrator") is a man who relates to the reader the weird tale told to him by a stranger whom he once met while riding on a train. The stranger was an old man who was carrying a framed picture on which two cloth dolls, each about

a foot high, were affixed. Background scenery was painted on the tablet around the two figures. The picture showed a love scene from a famous kabuki play. The dolls represented the lovers in the play. One was an elderly man and the other a beautiful, elegantly dressed girl, around seventeen years old. The dolls were extraordinarily life-like and sensual. In fact, on closer inspection, it appeared to the narrator that the dolls were indeed alive. The old man carrying the picture (the narrator of the story's embedded tale, hereafter referred to as "the traveler") disclosed that the male doll in the picture was actually his older brother, who had turned into the cloth doll long ago, when he was twenty-five years old. The traveler proceeded to relate to the narrator the circumstances leading to this fantastic occurrence.

When the traveler was a boy, his older brother fell in love at first sight with a woman whom he glimpsed at a distance, through a pair of binoculars, while standing at the top of the tall tower in Asakusa Park. Ordinarily indifferent to women, he was mysteriously enchanted by the girl. He returned to the tower day after day, hoping to catch sight of the girl again, but in vain. One day while he was gazing through his binoculars from the tower with him (his younger brother) at his side, he happened to glimpse the girl again. The two of them descended to the ground and pursued the girl, only to discover, to his older brother's dismay, that she was merely a cloth doll in a picture which was on display in a peep-show booth. His older brother expressed his ardent desire to trade places with the male doll in the picture in order to join the girl who had captivated him. He directed his younger brother to gaze at him through the wrong end of his binoculars. This magically reduced him to the size of the male doll, enabling him to take the doll's place in the picture. He (the younger brother) bought the picture tablet and since then he has devoted his life to his brother's care and companionship. The traveler observed to the narrator that the only thing that mars his brother's perfect happiness is that unlike the female doll, who remains forever young, his brother, being human, has continued to age, and is now a ravaged old man, his face twisted in an expression of anguish. When his strange tale ended, the traveler apologized to his brother for embarrassing him (by telling his life story to a stranger). Then he carefully wrapped up the tablet, bid the narrator farewell, disembarked from the train, and disappeared into the night.

As in *Hitodenashi no koi*, much of the female doll's extraordinary appeal lies in its fusion of erotic immediacy and otherworldly purity and remoteness. The doll's appearance is described in startlingly sensual terms — she literally "quivers with vitality," exuding a sexual aura which surpasses that of mortal women. Yet because she is an object, her youthful, vibrant beauty seems eternal; it is relatively invulnerable to change. In this story, the fact that the doll, together with her doll-lover, is contained in a framed picture reinforces the

illusion that they exist within a self-contained, separate world, a utopian realm of timeless love and beauty. This world is at once powerfully alluring, utterly strange, vaguely grotesque, and somehow taboo even to peer into. Indeed, the narrator of the frame story receives just this impression when he is first shown the tablet by the traveler. This impression is magnified and intensified when, at the traveler's urging, the narrator gazes at the picture through the old man's binoculars. He describes his response to the picture in these words: "I peered through the old-fashioned, nineteenth-century binoculars and saw a marvelous other world. There, the charming girl with the elegant chignon and the white-haired old man in quaint western clothes were leading their strange existence. I gazed, mesmerized, into that mysterious world, and was filled with an indescribably peculiar sensation, as if a wizard had just given me a glimpse into something forbidden." (「十九世紀の古風なプリズム双眼鏡の玉の向こう側には、まったく私たちの思いも及ばぬ別世界があって、そこに結い綿の色娘と、古風な洋服のしらが男とが、奇怪な生活をいとなんでいる。のそいては悪いものを 私は今、魔法使いにのそかされているのだといったような、形容のできない変てこな気持ちで、しかし、私は憑かれたようにその不可思議な世界に見入ってしまった。」)¹²

The utopian realm that the doll represents has religious overtones as a kind of sanctuary — a hidden, sacred space — and the doll itself is described in terms of being as much a religious icon as an object of sexual desire. The religious atmosphere that surrounds the doll is evoked by the language of the text and several details in the tale. Descriptions of the picture are informed by a discourse of the sacred and sublime. The picture itself portrays the doll-couple enjoying a rendezvous in the guestroom of the Kichijō Temple. The older brother first sights the girl-doll through his binoculars in the compound of the Kannon Temple, enshrined, as it were, in a building at the back of the temple. He sees the girl-doll far in the distance, when he is standing high above the ground, amid the clouds; this scene highlights both his own association with the ethereal and the girl's remoteness and inaccessibility.

In his youth, the older brother was idealistic in outlook, ethereal and refined in appearance, and somewhat eccentric in his interests and tastes. He collected exotic novelties and art objects, was intrigued by optical devices (like binoculars), and dressed in stylish, European clothes. To his younger brother, who idolized him, he appeared as remote, delicate, "saintly," and "like a figure in a western oil painting" (26). Upon falling in love with the girl, whom he glimpses at a distance, he becomes more preoccupied and remote in manner than ever. He stops eating and his slender body begins to waste away in anguished longing for her. When he discovers that she is a doll, he becomes all the more enamored of her, for her artificial, aesthetic nature confirms his view of her as the embodiment of perfect, unattainable beauty. The fundamentally non-sexual nature of the man's attraction to the doll, which is further clarified

when he unhesitatingly renounces his sexuality by turning himself into a doll, underscores the doll's significance as an epitome of spiritualized beauty, and the world of the picture as a transcendent, ideal realm, rather than a earthly paradise of ordinary sexual fulfillment.

Arguably, the doll represents the brother's secret desire to be a doll, more than his professed desire to be the girl-doll's lover. Veiled beneath expressions of longing for the unattainable female Other, the brother's primary desire, it would seem, is the narcissistic desire to remain forever young and beautiful himself. For this, he sacrifices everything, not simply to be near the girl-doll, but to become a doll in order to enjoy the same illusion of eternal life as she. (The expression of anguish on the male-doll's face seems to signify his painful awareness of his mortality and impending death.) Another important aspect of the doll's allure for the brother is the prospect of metamorphosis into a timeless liminal state in which he is not only both animate and inanimate, but male and female. In fact, becoming a doll entails renouncing all aspects of conventional masculinity. As a doll, the man enjoys a non-sexual relationship with the girl-doll that is based on similarity, rather than erotic otherness. Moreover, he occupies a conventionally feminine position vis-à-vis those in the world outside the picture, as passive object of their gazes. The realm of the picture is a utopia for the older brother insofar as it permits him to escape the normal male social role and indulge his feminine aspirations. (This story thus develops a motif that is present in subtler form in *Hitodenashi no koi*. In that story the male protagonist merely plays at being female in a private setting, for brief intervals, while outwardly maintaining an ordinary married life.) Although the disruption of conventional gender norms is more extreme in *Oshie to tabi suru otoko*, it is also more complex and subtle. Ostensibly the older brother usurps the position of the male doll in the picture in order to take his place as the girl-doll's paramour. But significantly, the dolls in the picture represent actors in a stage play who are performing roles. The fact that the brother undergoes a process of phallic divestiture in order to be permanently trapped performing a quintessentially heterosexual male role in a play, pleasantly complicates the text's gender codes and highlights the text's self-consciousness of the artificial, performative nature of gender roles. Masquerading as the tale of a man's pursuit and attainment of ideal, heterosexual romantic love, the story obliquely affirms self-castration and feminization as sources of (shameful) pleasure.

What specific pleasures are available to the man once he has become a doll? By becoming a doll the man becomes a virtual caricature of femininity. He becomes tiny and pretty, loses his freedom of movement, loses his sexual function, and becomes dependent on a man — his brother — for his every need. Previously a voyeur, always equipped with his precious pair of binoculars, he surrenders the masculine role of voyeur to his brother, and assumes the femi-

nine position of object of the gaze. After entering the picture tablet, for the rest of his life he can experience the pleasure and humiliation of being the object of people's stares — curious, admiring, astonished, contemptuous.

By serving as a bridge between the two brothers that links them in a permanent, unconventional symbiotic relationship, the doll is the agent and preserver of a love that exceeds the bounds of the fraternal and converges with the homoerotic. Under the guise of mutual devotion to a cult of ideal love, eternal beauty, and youth, whose ideals are epitomized by the doll-icon, the brothers cast themselves in the roles of her celibate devotees, and enter into a lifelong relationship of interdependency with, and mutual devotion to, each other. The older brother symbolically castrates himself to join the doll in the picture. The traveler, who from childhood idolized his older brother, is the willing agent of his brother's feminization. It is he who, at his brother's request, initiates a series of inversions and reversals; he replaces his brother as voyeur, inverts the binoculars, directs his (male) gaze at his older brother, and thereby reduces him to infant size. By doing so he enables his brother to enter the peep-show picture, a microcosm of beautiful objects on display, thus consigning him permanently to the feminine position of passive object of the gaze of spectators. Thereafter, the younger brother assumes complete care of his older brother (a social role reversal), thus situating himself in the conventional male position *vis-à-vis* him. He has apparently remained single, and he leads a wandering life, carrying the picture with him at all times. When he rides on a train, he props the picture tablet against a window to let the dolls enjoy the passing scenery. He displays the dolls to strangers and tells the dolls' tale. He sometimes even invites strangers to observe the dolls through his inherited binoculars.

The female doll in this story, ostensibly the sole object of male idealization and erotic fantasy, fulfills the muted, but perhaps more vital role of mediating the special relationship between the brothers. In this story doll-love is represented overtly as both worship of ideal femininity and erotic objectification of feminine beauty. These aspects of doll-love divert attention from the story's homoerotic subtext, both for the characters in the story and the readers of the story. In disguising one erotic script beneath another, the doll functions in a way typical of fetishes: it allows men to express their taboo feminine wishes under the mantle of stereotypically heterosexual male eroticism.

The three male characters in the story are linked through a quasi-religious rhetoric of ritual transmission of forbidden knowledge through the act of peering into a secret world. The elder brother invites the younger to peek through a peephole at the cloth picture, and the traveler in the train invites the narrator to look at his picture tablet. Each initiates another man into a secret world, whose focal point is a doll-goddess, voluptuous but sexually inaccessible,

through whose veneration men are linked to each other in a fraternity of occult knowledge and mutual devotion. In the characteristic manner of a fetish, which permits the expression of forbidden desires by disguising them in a socially acceptable erotic form, the doll mediates the male bond, simultaneously veiling and exposing it. At the heart of the utopian rhetoric of ideal beauty and romantic love in which the text enshrines the doll-icon is a worship of the doll as fetishistic emblem of phallic womanhood.

MUSHI (Maggots, 1929)

Mushi is the novella-length tale of a hypersensitive, misanthropic man who murders a beautiful woman who has spurned him. He then becomes so enamored of her corpse that he cannot bring himself to dispose of it. The protagonist, Masaki Aizō, is a lonely, eccentric bachelor who leads a bat-like existence in a musty, gloomy storehouse. Here, surrounded by various antiques, heirlooms, and art and religious objects, he spends his time “reading old books and plunged in strange fantasies.”¹³ A chance reunion with a female acquaintance named Kinoshita Fuyō, on whom he had a crush when they were classmates in elementary school, rekindles his obsession with her. When Fuyō, now a popular stage actress, rejects Masaki’s advances and humiliates him, he strangles her and brings her to his lonely dwelling, planning to savor his revenge, then dump her down the well in his garden. But to his surprise and delight, the doll-like corpse yields an array of unanticipated pleasures. The last few chapters of the story describe the man’s desperate attempts to prevent the corpse from completely decomposing. During the process of its disintegration he is elevated to ever greater heights of aesthetic and sexual ecstasy. In the end he commits suicide, and his corpse is found embracing Fuyō’s unidentifiable remains.

The doll-like creature in this story is a corpse, the epitome of liminality, poised as it is precisely on the boundary between living creature and inanimate object. From the time Masaki Aizō brings the murdered woman’s corpse into his creepy retreat, a carnivalesque atmosphere begins to permeate that secret space. From the reader’s perspective, Masaki’s solitary revelries cause ordinary value hierarchies to be inverted, boundaries of every kind to be transgressed, and the sacred and taboo to coalesce.

The carnivalesque tone of these last twenty-five pages of the novella is set when Masaki arrives home with the corpse in a mood of festive exuberance. He orders his housekeeper to buy the finest wine possible for the occasion, which he silently refers to as his “strange wedding celebration” (146), the bride, of course, being Fuyō’s corpse. At this point the corpse is still fresh and virtually indistinguishable from the living woman. Fuyō was both the lifelong object of Masaki’s unrequited love, and recently his tormentor and humiliator.

Stripping and violating her body provide him with erotic and sadistic satisfactions which, although chilling, would not seem particularly perverse did they not involve necrophilia. Masaki's pleasure in erotic domination and vengeful humiliation soon give way to the opposite feelings of pity aroused by his realization of the formerly proud woman's present vulnerability. Her corpse suddenly reminds him of his sole childhood playmate, a doll that he used to talk to and hug "like a girl" (149) when he was a lonely little boy. As he embraces and fondles the corpse, he is transported back to his childhood; he derives sensual and psychological comfort from cuddling the corpse as if it were his former doll. The boundaries between him and the corpse begin to grow tenuous as he oscillates between hostile objectification of his beloved's corpse and tender identification with it.

As the corpse begins decomposing, it seems to radiate a luminous, otherworldly aura. In Masaki's eyes, Fuyō's newly enhanced beauty far surpasses that which she possessed while alive. The mad passion that this bewitching beauty stirs in him, even as the corpse emits a suffocating stench, strikes Masaki as "hellish," "nightmarish," and "insane." But as the corpse continues to decompose, Fuyō acquires a "saintly" aura in his eyes. Her body glows with a translucent purity that reminds him of a marble statue of the Virgin Mary.

At this point Fuyō's corpse provides Masaki with a new and unexpected source of pleasure — that of artistic creation. In order to disguise the decay marks that are now covering the corpse, signaling its imminent disintegration, he begins to apply makeup to it. Delighted by the sudden awakening of his latent artistic talents, Masaki throws himself into the task. In his passion for decoration he resembles a painter who uses a corpse as his canvas, or a doll maker who is creating a life-size doll. He experiences considerable aesthetic gratification from the success of his beautification project, then sexual pleasure from kissing and caressing his masterpiece.

As the corpse's boundaries slowly dissolve, Masaki's desperate attachment to it starts to take on what Freud termed the "oceanic" quality of mother-infant symbiosis. It is as if the corpse's disintegration into primordial ooze stimulates in Masaki's psyche an analogous process of regression. As the corpse nears complete dissolution, Masaki experiences a frenzied burst of apocalyptic love; he weeps and laughs uncontrollably, seeming briefly to enjoy a kind of emotional catharsis. After this he descends into total madness, and finally he commits suicide.

In an essay on Ranpo's literature entitled "The Aesthetics of Inversion" (*Hanten no bigaku*) Minagawa Hiroko (a current author of suspense fiction written in a refined, if rather florid, *ero-guro* vein), observes that while reading Ranpo's tales one often experiences "a strange inversion, whereby what

appears ghastly in the light of day is transformed into something beautiful by the darkness.”¹⁴ She calls this story, *Mushi* “one of the most extreme examples” of Ranpo’s “aesthetics of inversion” (121).

CONCLUSION

I have attempted to demonstrate in this short essay that in Ranpo’s tales of doll-love, a discourse of perverse sexual desire intersects with a quest for a utopian domain of pure, supersensual love. The doll functions to lure men away from normative heteroeroticism toward a realm variously portrayed as a primitive, sometimes grisly, domain of infantile eroticism, or on the other hand, a higher, spiritual plane characterized by love surpassing the ordinary love of men and women.

In their discussions of Ranpo’s literature, critics have tended to emphasize one aspect over the other. Shibusawa Tatsuhiko writes, for example, that Ranpo’s image of utopia is “far removed from the land that Baudelaire celebrated in his poem, where ‘only order and beauty, luxury, serenity, and pleasure’ reign. It is prone, rather, to be a utopia of violent fantasies and sado-masochistic pleasures.”¹⁵ Gonda Manji, on the other hand, argues that Ranpo’s tales of doll-love and other aberrant forms of love express, above all, the author’s longing for an ideal love that transcends sexuality, a love basically Platonic in nature.¹⁶ I have tried to suggest here that these two apparently opposing trends may be better viewed as two aspects of the same sensibility, rather than as contradictory impulses.

Notes

1. Edogawa Ranpo, “Henshin ganbō,” in *Zoku · Gen’eiō*, pp. 282 and 288.
2. See Ranpo’s discussion of *kakure mino* as a psychological and a literary motif related to the desire for disguise, in “Tantei shōsetsu ni egakareta iyō na hanzai dōki,” in *Zoku · Gen’eiō*, pp. 130-136.
3. For a concise and engaging overview of Ranpo’s life and literary career, see Suzuki Sadami, *Edogawa Ranpo*. An enormous amount of critical literature on Ranpo exists in Japanese. (An excellent guide to reference materials published between 1923 and 1995 is *Ranpo bunken deta bukku*.) On the contrary, published research on Ranpo in English is nearly nil. This essay is intended as a preliminary contribution to Ranpo scholarship in English, in the hope that it will stimulate more extensive studies, from various perspectives, of the work of this influential author.
4. Author-critic Nakada Kōji argues that all the variations on the themes of fantasies of disguise and metamorphosis in Ranpo’s fiction can be subsumed under a primary one: the desire to be the opposite sex. See “Erochizumusu e no henki,” in *Taryō*, pp. 58-60.

5. Edogawa Ranpo, "Gurotesuku to erochishizumu," in *Gen'eiō tsūshin*, pp. 205-207. See also Edogawa Ranpo, "Kyōshū to shite no gurotesuku," in *Oni no kotoba*, pp. 276-279
6. Several of these essays are found in Edogawa Ranpo, *Gunshū no naka no Robinson*, pp. 137-261
7. Ranpo's essay "Ren'ai no funōsha" gives some interesting insights into the author's extreme ambivalence toward sexual intercourse and women. In *Gunshū no naka no Robinson*, pp. 111-114.
- 8 Interestingly, the first work of modern Japanese literature that Ranpo read which deeply impressed him and inspired him to read the fiction of other contemporary Japanese authors, was Tanizaki's "Konjiki no shi." In Ken K. Ito's words, this story concerns "a young aesthete tired of the world around him [who] sets out to construct a separate domain where all his cultural aspirations can be fulfilled." (*Visions of Desire*, p. 3) Ranpo writes of his enthusiastic response to this tale in "Tanizaki Jun'ichirō to Dosutoefuski," in *Tantei shōsetsu yonjūnen* 1, p. 34
9. Edogawa Ranpo, "Ningyō," in *Gunshū no naka no Robinson*, p. 30
10. Edogawa Ranpo, "Hitodenashi no koi," in *Bukimi na hanashi*, p. 71.
11. Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, p. 121.
12. Edogawa Ranpo, "Oshie to tabi suru otoko," in *Bukimi na hanashi*, pp. 18-19.
13. Edogawa Ranpo, "Mushi," in *Bukimi na hanashi*, pp. 103-104.
14. Minagawa Hiroko, "Hanten no bigaku," in *Edogawa Ranpo*, p. 121.
- 15 Shibusawa Tatsuhiko, "Gangu aikō to yūtopia — Ranpo bungaku no honshitsu," in *Hen'ateki sakkaron*, p. 244.
- 16 See Gonda Manji, "Tojikomareta yume," in *Edogawa Ranpo — hyōron to kenkyū*, especially pp. 143-144. Furukawa Makoto also espouses this view in his exploration of the significance of male homoeroticism in Ranpo's life, thought, and literature. See "Dōseiai kenkyūka to shite no Ranpo" in *Kokubungaku kaishaku to kanshō*, pp. 59-64.

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要 旨

江戸川乱歩の人形愛に関する三短編

マリエレン T モリ

本小論文は「人形愛」という主題を扱った江戸川乱歩の三編の小説、「人でなしの恋」、「押し絵と旅する男」、および「虫」、を論じる。乱歩の小説に通じて現われる人形愛と、自己変身への欲望との関係を論じる。人形の役割は、主人公の男性の隠された欲望を、擬宗教的な愛の形にまで昇華することによって、暴露するとともに隠蔽することであると考えられる。